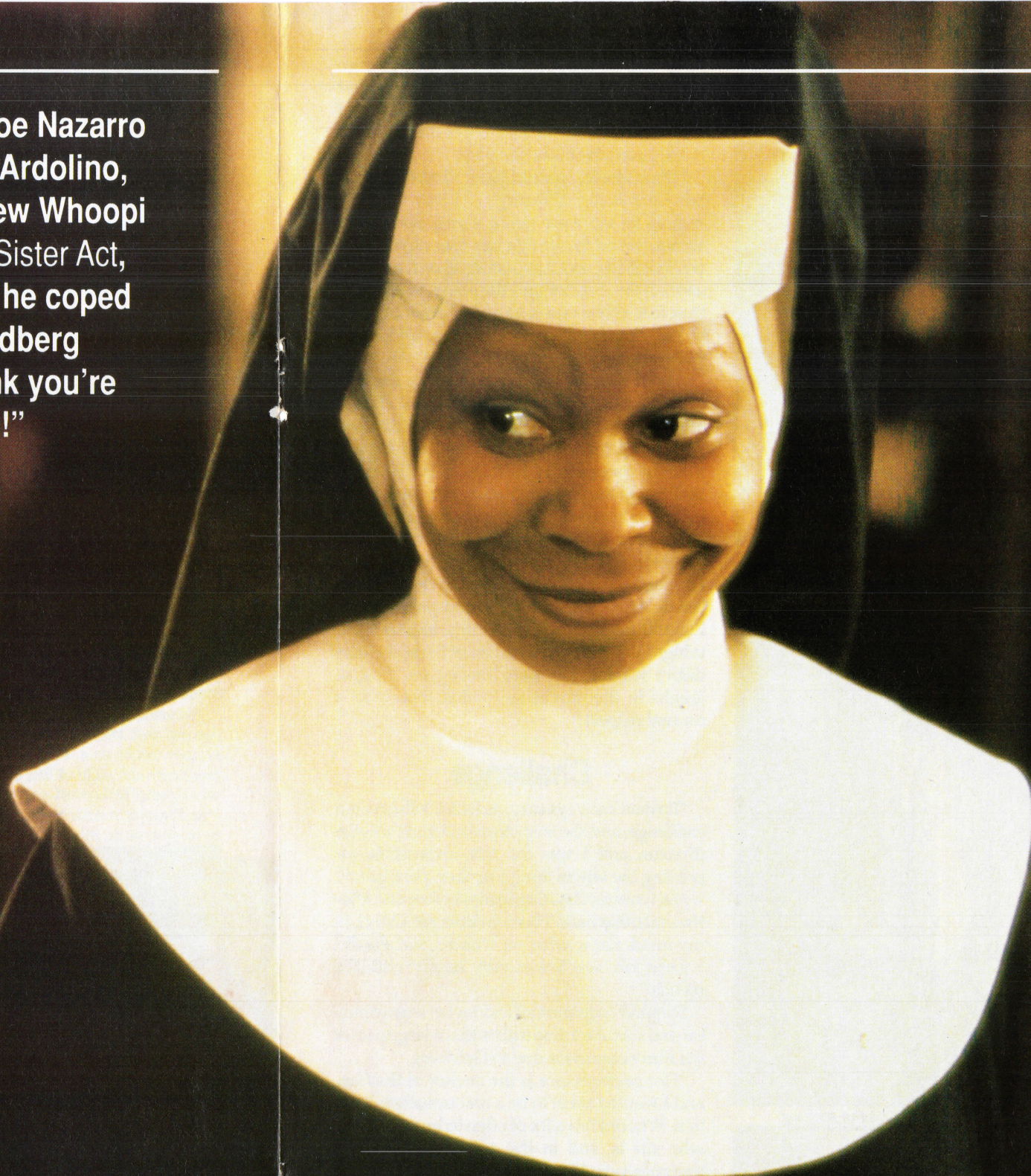


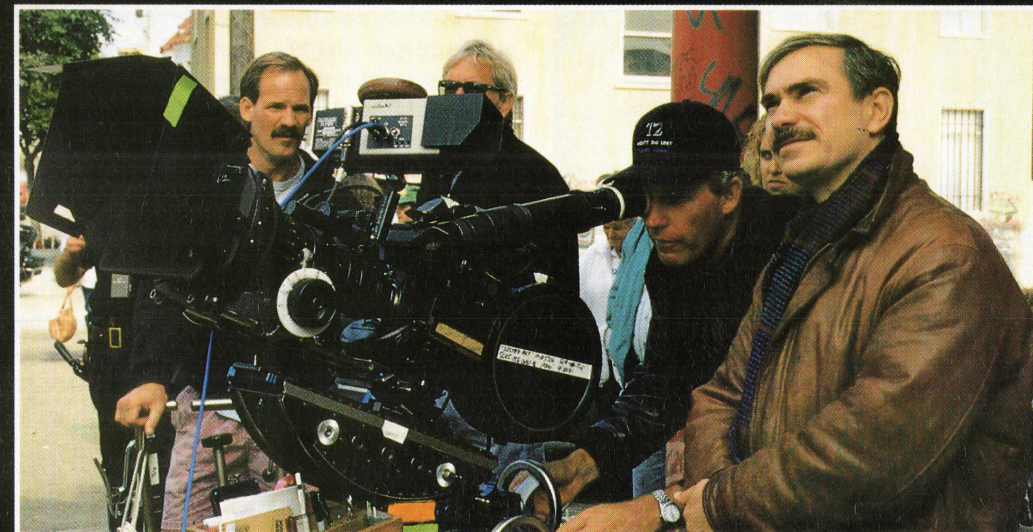
US correspondent Joe Nazarro tracks down Emile Ardolino, the director of the new Whoopi Goldberg comedy *Sister Act*, and discovers how he coped when feisty Goldberg proclaimed, "I think you're dead wrong!"

# Directing WHOOPI

Main picture: Deloris Van Cartier (Whoopi Goldberg) disguised as a nun with real nun Mary Robert (Makkena)



Academy Award-winning director Emile Ardolino on the set of *Sister Act*



**A**RDOLINO's first film, *Dancing*, was shot on a budget of less than \$1 million, and won the Best Picture award at the Cannes film festival. He then directed the hit comedy *Chances Are* (1989), which grossed more than \$170 million. His next film, *Boys n the Hood* (1990), a sequel to the popular *Thelma & Louise* (1991), brought him to the attention of Hollywood executives, who signed him to direct *Sister Act*.

Although it's still too early to say, *Sister Act* may well be the 49-year-old director's most successful effort to date. The film has already grossed more than \$135 million, making it one of the year's top performers. It features Whoopi Goldberg as a Las Vegas lounge singer who is sent to a convent for protection ordered by her manager, Harvey Keitel. After going undercover, Goldberg's character is placed in a protection program, and is assigned to a city convent, where she quickly becomes the nuns' daily — excuse the phrase — a few days, the bogus sister. She leads the church choir in song and dance, and is inspired by 1960s girl group music. She also befriends the local hookers and gangsters, and causes the chagrin of the Mother Superior, played by Maggie Smith.

## Musical V

It didn't take long for Ardolino to realize that *Sister Act* would be a wonderful musical. "When I read the script, it was really funny," he says. "It was a comedy, but loud a couple of times, which was a little too often. I was also attracted to the music, and really felt it was a musical, plus I was really excited about working with Whoopi, so those were the reasons for it."

Although *Sister Act* is primarily a comedy for Whoopi Goldberg, it was also a musical. With singer/actress Bette Midler, according to Ardolino, "It was a challenge when they were trying to do it, but she opted for the musical. She did *Boys*. Once she decided to do it, she went by, and I got a call from the production, who asked me if I thought Whoopi Goldberg in a musical sounded great, but obviously she had to make some adjustments in her singing. I said, 'Why don't you have her sing and see how you feel?'

"I did, and one of the first things I heard from me was, 'They're not forcing me to sing.' I said, 'Absolutely not.' It certainly came up, and I thought she was very high on her, but she tended to me that I would be the casting and if I would be the particular star."

Considering Goldberg's reputation for being outspoken,





Above: Second-rate nightclub singer Deloris Van Cartier (Whoopi Goldberg) is a Miss Ross wannabe



Above: Deloris tells her story; Below: Deloris as Sister Mary Clarence leading the singing



with some directors, Ardolino concedes that some friction did arise during the filming of *Sister Act*, but attributes most of the problems to the production's hectic pace.

"Occasionally, we did have a battle of wills, but I think the difficulty was that we were writing as we were going along. Sometimes scenes would be written just two days before we shot them, and that puts an enormous pressure on the director and the actors to think on their feet. When you have to do that for a couple of months, it gets very draining, and that's what made the situation difficult.

"From the first day I met Whoop, she was totally honest with me and said, 'Look, I ask a million questions' —and she did. As a director, you can't just say to her, 'Do this'. You have to be very prepared in working with Whoopi, because she's very intelligent, and she's a collaborator just as I am. There were times when I asked her to do something and she said, 'I think you're dead wrong'. I would say, 'Whoopi, if I am dead wrong, I won't put it in the film, but just do it for me', and for the most part, she did. I would say that 99% of the time she tried the things I wanted, and a couple of the scenes she didn't want to do were among her biggest laughs in the movie, so I think there was a mutual respect."

## Challenge

"It wasn't always easy, as I said. Whoopi is a challenge, and she is opinionated, but I was the director, and I was the one responsible for holding the whole thing together, particularly when we were shooting scenes before and after the scene that hadn't been written yet. Only I, in my mind, know what we wanted, but she did a great job, and I was very happy with the results."

Despite the minor difficulties between director and star, Ardolino insists that a large part of the film's success is due to Goldberg.

"Her performance is the anchor of the film, and I wanted there to be a real transformation in it. Whoopi has a lot of edge to her work and who she is, and in this transformation, she becomes more likeable, and the audience starts rooting for her. I feel in all my films, the reason they work is because there are characters the audience can identify with and be involved with, and certainly they were involved with Whoopi in *Sister Act*.

"In addition, we had the great plus of the music. When you're shooting musical numbers, there's such a feeling of euphoria on the set, and I think the power of the music was a very important factor in the film's success. It was also superbly cast. The contrast between Whoopi, Maggie and Harvey, as well as the new people and the old-timers made it a very interesting cast. It all came together, and Whoopi is hugely responsible for a good deal of it, because she's the centre of the film."

Ardolino was unhappy at first with the idea of Goldberg doing her own singing in the film,



although he now admits to being happy with the final result. "The first time I heard her sing, it didn't sound good at all," he confesses, "and we were very worried. We sent her to a singing coach who built up her confidence, and he opened her up in terms of how to manufacture the sounds and being able to breathe. Within a couple of weeks, I started to hear the results, and she was able to do all her own singing. I was surprised at first, but also very relieved and very happy."

## Future

Looking to the future, Ardolino's next project will be somewhat of a departure from his recent comedic efforts. "I decided I wanted to do something with a short shooting schedule, and I didn't want to deal with a script," he laughs, "so I did a film of the New York Ballet's production of **The Nutcracker**. We shot it in a theatre, and basically, it's a film version of the stage production. Macauley Culkin plays the Little Prince. We all did it for love — I did it for scale [a share of the profits] and Macauley did it for very little money. It's being edited right now."

"As far as the project after that, I'm really kind of tired because I haven't had a break in a long time, and even though I am at my 'hottest' now in Hollywood, I don't feel like going back to the grind of shooting immediately. I've been offered tons of movies, but I really haven't found one that I must do. I'm just taking it slowly and easily, looking for some kind of a change of pace. I would love to find a dramatic piece, something that has some social relevance to it."

## Sister Act II

As for the inevitable **Sister Act II**, Ardolino admits he *has* been approached to direct it. "They've already signed Whoopi," he confirms, "but I don't think I'm going to do it. I would certainly love to work with the same people again, and I think Disney makes a strong case that Spielberg, Lucas and Zemeckis all do their own sequels, but I really feel I'd like to do something different."

Another reason for Ardolino's reluctance to do a sequel is the difficulty of catching lightning in a bottle a second time. "When a commercial success like this happens," he explains, "it's very hard to put your finger on *why* it's happened. It's a combination of circumstances and decisions, and there's also a magic element there where the film takes on a life of its own. I don't know how easy it would be to recreate that magic."

"I did do a sequel, **Three Men and a Little Lady**, but it wasn't a sequel to my own work. I took it because the characters were fresh and new to me. I just have to take each story and do what I think is best, so one can never say; but I'm inclined not to do a sequel at this moment. I'm just grateful for the success of **Sister Act**."



Director Emile Ardolino with Whoopi Goldberg (top) and Mary Wickes (above)

## SISTER ACT COMPETITION!

No sex. No booze. No men. No way we'll be giving any of that away! However, we've got a package full of goodies, courtesy of Buena Vista International (UK) Limited, with which you can get into the **Sister Act** groove...

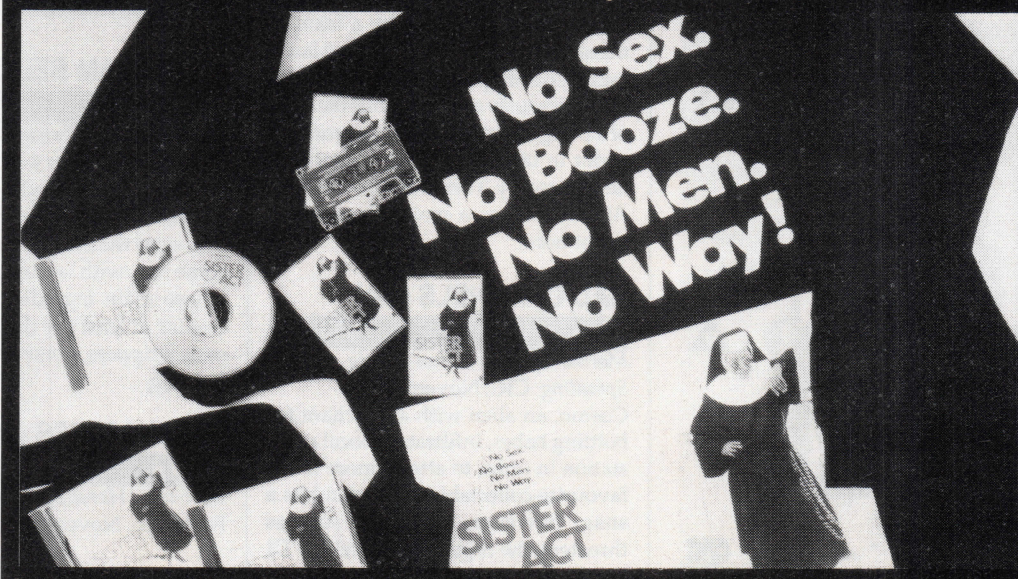
There are 15 **Sister Act** T-shirts (with 'No Sex...' etc emblazoned on them), 15 **Sister Act** soundtrack CDs, 15 **Sister Act** soundtrack cassettes and 15 **Sister Act** mini-posters on offer. The first randomly selected 15 winners will receive the CD and T-shirt, the next 15 selected will win the cassette and mini-poster. Just answer the question below correctly, and

you could be on the straight and narrow road to winning!

*In which Spielberg movie did Whoopi Goldberg first gain international notoriety?*

Answers on a postcard to:  
**FILM REVIEW (Whoopi!),**  
**Visual Imagination Ltd,**  
**PO Box 371,**  
**LONDON,**  
**SW14 8JL, UK**

Closing date, November 26





FILM OF THE MONTH

SISTER ACT



**Stars:** Whoopi Goldberg, Maggie Smith, Harvey Keitel; **Director:** Emile Ardolino; **Certificate:** PG; **Running Time:** 1 hour 40mins; **Opening Date:** November 20

**A singer goes on the run from her mobster boyfriend, hiding out in an inner city convent while waiting to testify against him.**

From the outset this winning comedy is unashamedly a Whoopi Goldberg vehicle, and therein lies its appeal or otherwise, as Whoopi plays a variation of her usual streetwise 'smart-ass', adding an unexpectedly strong singing voice to her characterization of Deloris Van Cartier.

The problems she encounters after witnessing her boyfriend (Harvey Keitel) kill an informant are predictable and telegraphed, but are quite competently handled with lively pace and humour contributing to the enjoyment which is only diminished a little by the story's total lack of suspense.

It never pretends to be the most original comedy in the world anyway, so further criticism of its form would be pedantic. The scene is set, Deloris

becomes an unlikely nun and — even more unlikely — as Sister Mary Clarence, proves to be a surprisingly effective one, training the convent's choir so well that even the Pope pops by for a Papal earful.

The songs, it must be said, are fun and energetic if a little corny, but that's fine as they're perfectly in keeping with the rest of the action and provide some relief from the bludgeoning comedy that persists throughout the film.

The unoriginal concept of a 'fish out of water' surviving against the odds is hackneyed but often effective, and works here despite its limitations, largely because of the quality of the experienced cast led by Whoopi, Maggie Smith and Keitel.

Cheap laughs abound, but if you can put your brain into neutral for a



*The non-sister act*

couple of hours and enjoy humour that employs the lowest common denominator then you shouldn't be disappointed. *Sister Act* proved a big hit

in the States and has the broad, safe, commercial appeal to repeat that success here.

Anwar Brett

*Taking a gamble...*

